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Ginzburg's Menocchio: Refutations and Conjectures

DAVID LEVINE
ZUBEDEH VAHED*

CARLO GINZBURG'S way of doing history is based on using "new methods and new standards of proof to bring to light those forms of knowledge or understanding of the world which have been suppressed or lost".¹ For most of his English-speaking readers, the proof of this assertion has been found in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*.²

Domenico Scandella, the sixteenth-century miller who was called by the nickname "Menocchio" by his contemporaries, was born in 1532 in the pre-Alp foothills of Friuli, about 100 kilometres north of Venice. As he told the court, "I am from Montereale, in the diocese of Concordia. My father was called Zuane and my mother Menega and I have lived in Montereale most of my life, except for two years when I was banished, of which I spent one in Arba and one in Cargna, and I was banished for being in a brawl."³ Menocchio's creative and imaginative ideas about the creation of the world — and his unconventional opinions about orthodox Catholicism — brought him to

* David Levine is professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Zubedeheh Vahed is employed by the Peel Board of Education in Ontario. We would like to thank Nathalie Davis, Konrad Eisenbichler, Stan Engermann, Ed Hundert, Barry Reay, Chuck Tilly and, of course, the journal's anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.

1 Keith Luria, "The Paradoxical Carlo Ginzburg", *Radical History Review*, vol. 35 (1986), p. 85.

2 The Italian original appeared in 1976. In North America this text, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1980; in England the same text was published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, also in 1980.

3 Menocchio's testimony at his two inquisitional trials is now available in English, edited by Andrea Del Col, *Domenico Scandella Known as Menocchio. His Trials Before the Inquisition (1583–1599)*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Binghampton, N.Y., 1996), p. 23. Arba is located about 10 kilometres east of Montereale; Cargna (Carnia) is located further afield — about 40 kilometres east and slightly north of Menocchio's home. Carnia is located at the foot of the Alpi Carniche, 40 kilometres north of Udine and close to the Slovenian borderlands. Control over these Slovenian borderlands had been fiercely contested by Venice, in a series of wars with the Ottomans, stretching back into the fifteenth century. Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli During the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 92–93, 126–135. Is this a case of Mohammed having come to Menocchio? We shall return to this point.

the attention of the Inquisition in 1583 although he had been spouting his heretical beliefs for several decades to anyone who would listen.⁴

The result of his first trial, during which time he was incarcerated from his arrest in October 1583 until his abjuration in May 1584, was that Menocchio was proclaimed a heretic. After his abjuration he was not released but spent another 20 months in the episcopal prison in Concordia where his behaviour was said to have been exemplary by Ser Giovanni Battista de Parvis, his guard and jailer.⁵ In January 1586 he petitioned for release on the grounds that he had reformed and that his continued imprisonment was a hardship for his wife and seven surviving children. His request was granted, although his return to Christian society was encumbered with a series of penitential requirements, the most notable of which was that he had to wear a garment with flaming crosses that proclaimed his infamy, while also being subjected to a kind of house arrest in his native village of Montereale.

Once chastened, however, Menocchio did not stop talking, nor did he confine himself to Montereale. After 12 years on the outside, he was again arrested and tried and convicted as a relapsed heretic. By the edict of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in the diocese of Concordia, egged on by the interventions of Pope Clement VIII himself, abetted by the Cardinal of Santa Severina who was the senior member of the Vatican's Congregation of the Holy Office, the 67-year-old miller was burnt at the stake by the Venetian secular authorities in 1599. While there is no direct evidence relating to Menocchio's execution, we know about it indirectly because of a notarial act drawn up on August 16, 1599, referring to his son Stefano as "the son of the deceased Domenico Scandella".⁶ Menocchio was most probably killed in accordance with the Venetian criminal law which states, "The punishment of the heretic ... is fire, as prescribed in divine, canon, civil, and common law, so that the body while still living should be burned up and be reduced to ashes."⁷

Ginzburg based his story on the trial records of the Venetian Inquisition, operating on the *terrafirma* in Friuli. He also examined Menocchio's reading matter to reconstruct "his discussion, his thought and his sentiments — fears, hopes, ironies, rages, despairs".⁸ Through his reconstruction of Menocchio's ideas, Ginzburg developed his hypothesis regarding "the popular culture (more precisely, peasant culture) of pre-industrial Europe, in an age marked by the spread of printing and the Protestant Reformation".⁹ It is a testament to *The Cheese and the Worms'* intellectual energy that this won-

4 In point of fact, Menocchio had been brought to the attention of the Inquisition several years earlier as a result of an anonymous denunciation, but nothing had come of this. Del Col, "Introduction", *Domenico Scandella*, p. xii.

5 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 100–101.

6 *Ibid.*, p. cxi.

7 Quoted in *ibid.*

8 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. xi. Ginzburg concluded that "every now and then the directness of the sources brings him very close to us: as a man like ourselves, one of us" (p. xi).

9 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

derful book has provoked so many unanswered questions concerning both Ginzburg's argument and methodology as well as the origin of Menocchio's ideas that we were led to inquire further into this subject. We were troubled that Ginzburg did not pursue some very obvious leads, especially since his findings were, by his own admission, often inconclusive or weak.¹⁰ Ginzburg's preoccupation to substantiate his particular understanding of the peasant culture leads him to present a partially constructed picture of Menocchio's discussion, thought, and sentiments. In exploring and tracing some missing links hinted at in Menocchio's testimony and Ginzburg's account, we hope to add to Ginzburg's reconstruction of Menocchio's story and to answer some — but by no means all — of the unanswered questions.

Opening a Can of Worms

Readers have found Ginzburg's idea of circulation between popular culture and elite culture especially appealing. Roger Chartier notes that Ginzburg's book spoke to historians who were then becoming interested in collective discourses and the cultural exercise of language:

As Carlo Ginzburg shows, when the documents authorize it, it is entirely permissible to explore, as through a magnifying glass, the way a man of the people can think and use the sparse intellectual elements that reach him from literate culture by means of his books and the reading he gives them. Here Bakhtin is turned upside down, since a system of representations is constructed

10 *Ibid.*, p. 155. Ginzburg writes, "It's legitimate to object that the hypothesis that traces Menocchio's ideas about the cosmos to a remote oral tradition is also unproven — and perhaps destined to remain so even if, as I've stated above, I intend in the future to demonstrate its possibility with additional evidence." To the best of our knowledge, this "additional evidence" has not yet appeared, since Ginzburg's subsequent book, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (New York, 1991), tells us "nothing about possible cultural mediators (be they traders or wetnurses) and relatively little about oral literature, whether magical tales, fables, or epic poetry. Consequently, *Storia notturna*, has an eerily disembodied quality, with the various *Völke* (nomads of the steppes, Scythians, Celts, peasants in the Friuli, and so on) relegated to the status of shadowy protagonists at best. There is little sense of social or cultural differentiation within these societies" (John Martin, "Journeys to the World of the Dead: The Work of Carlo Ginzburg", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 25 [1992], p. 620). Martin's comments bring to mind Edward Muir's discussion of "narratives [which] were given the form of legends continuously retold over generations on winter nights around the *fogolar*. In Friuli the *fogolar*, the large freestanding hearth surrounded by benches on three sides and located in an alcove attached to the kitchen of the great castles and even of modest rural houses, provides the locus for social communication, much as did the piazza in the parts of Italy more urbanized and blessed with a climate hospitable to outdoor life. The intimate, private character of the *fogolar*, restricted to family, friends, servants, clients, and guests, undoubtedly contributed to the extreme cultural isolation and linguistic stratification of Friuli" around 1500 (*Mad Blood Stirring*, pp. xxvii–xxviii). Similar domestic organization of warmth and communication are reported by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie for Montaignou, Languedoc, in the early fourteenth century, as well as for rural Tuscany as recently as 1973. Alessandro Falassi, *Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context of the Tuscan Veglia* (Austin, Texas, 1980). In contrast, Menocchio's oral society is essentially decontextualized in terms of both its chronology and the material culture which surrounded such communications.

from fragments borrowed from scholarly and bookish culture, giving them another meaning, because in the system's foundation there is another culture.¹¹

That is not all there is to the book's attraction to recent scholars, because *The Cheese and the Worms* also provided an illustration of how Gramscian theories could be domesticated in an historical analysis that partook of both Marxian and Foucauldian approaches:

The hegemonic culture can provide a common ground. But what is crucial is to relate that common ground to the issue of power. And what is interesting even if you have a hegemony, even if cultural artifacts, attitudes, or behaviors are imposed from above, is the way in which peasants, for instance, could mold those artifacts and behaviors for different purposes, and in different ways.¹²

In his *Radical History Review* interview, Ginzburg advises us that "if you start with different problems you have to look for different evidence ... I think that you also have to change the rules of historical method in some ways because you have to learn how to handle that different evidence. So you also have to change the standards of proof."¹³ One is surprised, then, that Ginzburg failed to follow his own advice to weigh unused evidence before him with regard to Menocchio's relationship with the Koran. Menocchio's trial record and his own monograph's text both frequently refer to the Koran. It is very important to look more closely at Ginzburg's text to see how he treats references to the Islamic verses.

On page 18 Ginzburg writes, "According to Simon, in fact, Menocchio denied all value to the Gospel, had rejected the divinity of Christ, and had praised a book that may have been the Koran." If we turn to the trial record reprinted by Del Col, we find a rather different form of evidence. "Simon the Jew" was not interrogated directly but, rather, his words are repeated in the "Denunciation" lodged on August 3, 1599, by a priest, Michele Carboni, who had met Simon "at the house of the innkeeper, *donna* Narda". Simon was a convert — he "has become a Christian, and goes around begging in the diocese" — who told Carboni that "he had once spent the night with that miller ['at least a year ago'] and all through the night the miller said enormous things about the faith ... he also said that he had read a most beautiful book". Under examination by the heretic-hunting inquisitor, Fra Girolamo Asteo, Carboni expanded his testimony as follows: "I do not know where that Jew

11 Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories" in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), pp. 315–316.

12 Keith Luria and Romulo Gandolfo, "Carlo Ginzburg: An Interview", *Radical History Review*, vol. 35 (1986), p. 108.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

is from, but it was about 15 days ago that he came to Portogruaro¹⁴ and slept in the hospital of St. Thomas with four or five persons, Jews who became Christians.’ And he [i.e. Carboni] added of his own accord: ‘That book that the aforesaid prisoner said he had, that Jew thought that it must be the *Koran*.’ ”¹⁵ At least part of this story was substantiated a few days later, on August 6, when Menocchio told the inquisitor and the court that “one night I slept with a Jew and I discussed my heresies with him, as best as I can remember”.¹⁶

At the top of page 30, in a discussion of Menocchio’s library, Ginzburg notes that there was “an unidentified book that a witness supposed was the *Koran* (an Italian translation had appeared in Venice in 1547)”. In the next section, Ginzburg discusses how “Menocchio managed to get hold of these books” but notes in passing that we have no information about “the presumed *Koran*”.

After discussing what he has been able to discover about Menocchio’s other books, on page 32 Ginzburg writes, “Certainly, the *Koran* (if Menocchio really did read it) stands out on this list; but it’s an exception that we’ll consider separately [see references to page 101]. The rest are fairly obvious titles that appear incapable of shedding light on how Menocchio had happened to formulate what one of this fellow villagers called ‘fantastic opinions’.”

While discussing Mandeville’s *Travels* on page 43, Ginzburg notes:

Mandeville’s long exposition of Mohammed would have fascinated Menocchio even more. It appears from the second trial that he attempted (but, as we said, the evidence is unconfirmed) to satisfy his curiosity on the subject by directly reading the *Koran*, which had been translated into Italian in mid-sixteenth century. But Menocchio would have been able to learn even more from Mandeville’s travels certain beliefs of the Mohammedans that coincide in part with his own.

Ginzburg then goes on to discuss Menocchio’s ideas about Jesus as prophet, a rejection of Christ’s crucifixion, and the paradox of the cross, all in relation to Mandeville’s *Travels*. On the next page, Ginzburg notes, “These are obvious, if partial, similarities. But it doesn’t seem possible that reading these pages could have troubled Menocchio.” Mandeville’s stories would have provided Menocchio with “a confirmation and a justification for his own implacable criticism of the Church but not a reason for feeling deeply trou-

14 Portogruaro is the largest and most important town in western Friuli; it is located about 20 kilometres south of Montereale, along the main road to Venice.

15 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 152–153. For some additional commentary on the difference between Ginzburg’s “may have been the *Koran*” and Del Col’s translation of Carboni’s testimony to “must be the *Koran*”, see our discussion of this point below relating to its appearance on page 101 of *The Cheese and the Worms*.

16 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 155.

bled. This must be found elsewhere.” In urging us to look “elsewhere”, Ginzburg would have us concentrate on Menocchio’s reading practice rather than the texts he read. This is a key point; indeed, it is Ginzburg’s central argument in *The Cheese and the Worms*. A few pages later on page 51, Ginzburg writes, “It was not the book as such, but the encounter between the printed page and oral culture that formed an explosive mixture in Menocchio’s head.”

In discussing Menocchio’s understanding of the afterlife on page 77, Ginzburg writes, “Menocchio’s peasant paradise probably took more from the Mohammedan (rather than the Christian) hereafter about which he had read in Mandeville’s lively description....”

Recounting the evidence of Simon on page 101, Ginzburg writes that “he had also talked of a ‘most beautiful book’, which unfortunately he had lost, and which Simon ‘judged was the Koran’.” In Del Col’s translation of the priest’s testimony, Carboni said that Simon told him “it must be the *Koran*” — there is a significant difference in emphasis between these two renderings. Whatever the case may have been, it has to be acknowledged that whatever text we have — Italian or English (or even the Latin of the original) — is several removes from the original.¹⁷ In addition, Ginzburg’s presentation glosses over the fact that Simon’s testimony is second-hand or what would be called “hearsay” in a court of law today. In the next para-

17 The issue of language and translation is not only particularly difficult but also opens itself to dead-end issues of over-interpretation. Menocchio most likely spoke a local Friulian patois and understood Venetian while his inquisitors spoke the Venetian dialect and probably understood the Friulian speech. The court’s scribe transferred these exchanges into Latin; Del Col translated this record into Italian and that text was itself translated into English. Even comparing the translation of the Koran into sixteenth-century Italian with Del Col’s translation of the trial record into twentieth-century Italian does little to bridge this gap because we have a convoluted chain of translations that would be obscured, not enlightened, by an obsessive concern with textual analysis. Furthermore — and, in our opinion, much more significantly — the very nature of the trial record is the product of a one-sided, question-and-answer interrogation in which Menocchio’s statements are constructed by and filtered through a judicial sieve that was extraordinarily attentive to heretical utterances that did not square with orthodox Catholic structures of thought. It cannot escape the reader’s attention that the trials’ purpose was to locate Menocchio’s un-orthodoxy on an x/y grid, and then to apply the full knowledge and power of the inquisitors’ hammer against him to engineer his abject submission. Menocchio’s statements are simply statements; they are frightened utterances, not constructed text. We believe, therefore, that Menocchio’s statements are less susceptible to being teased out as rhetorical images than simply being presented as inchoate ideas that were positioned by his attempt to resist the very knowledge/power struggle in which he was an unwilling accomplice. Finally, what is missing from the trial record is the element of fear, engendered by the process itself, that engulfed Menocchio as he came to realize that, no matter what he said, it was going to be translated (so to speak) onto the inquisitors’ x/y grid of Catholic orthodoxy. That is why Menocchio’s desire to speak truth to power was both hesitant and qualified; and the hesitancy and qualifications became more prominent as he came to realize (in both trials) that the inquisitors did not want to debate with him — they wanted to hammer him into submission. So, beaten and defeated, Menocchio submitted twice. We cannot know, unlike what we know for Galileo, what Menocchio muttered under his breath as he formally submitted by acknowledging the error of his thoughts.

graph Ginzburg comes close to admitting what is almost unthinkable: “It may have been Menocchio’s rejection of the central dogmas of Christianity — and principally that of the Trinity — that had led him, like other heretics of the period, to turn with curiosity to the Koran. Unfortunately, Simon’s identification isn’t definite, and in any case we don’t know what Menocchio took from that mysterious ‘most beautiful book’.” Ginzburg giveth; Ginzburg taketh away.

Ginzburg returns to this obscure and tantalizing bit of evidence concerning the prize possession in Menocchio’s library on pages 107 and 108. He writes that in the second trial, “What may have influenced him was a reading of that Koran (the ‘most beautiful book’ identified by the converted Jew Simon), which the archangel Gabriel had dictated to the prophet Mohammed. Menocchio may have thought that he could discover ‘the nature of the heavens’ in the apocryphal dialogue between the rabbi Abdullah ibn Sallam and Mohammed, inserted in book one of the Italian translation of the Koran....” But in the next paragraph he writes, “These are merely conjectures. We don’t have proof that the ‘most beautiful book’ about which Menocchio had spoken enthusiastically was indeed the Koran; and even if we did, we couldn’t reconstruct the way in which Menocchio read it. A text so totally foreign to his experience and culture would have been incomprehensible to him — and would have led him for this very reason to project his own thoughts and fantasies onto the page.” Once more, Ginzburg giveth; Ginzburg taketh away.

Discussing the parallels between Menocchio’s ideas and those discovered in the writings of an “unknown rustic of the Lucchese countryside who hid behind the pseudonym Scolio [and who] spoke of his visions in a long, still unpublished poem, the *Settenario*”, Ginzburg notes on pages 116 and 117, “This is an echo of the paradise in the Koran — joined here to a peasant dream of material opulence, characteristically expressed immediately after with features reminiscent of a myth we have previously encountered.” He continues:

The similarities between Scolio’s prophecies and Menocchio’s discourses are evident. They can’t be explained, obviously, by the existence of common sources — the *Divine Comedy*, the Koran — that were certainly known to Scolio and probably to Menocchio. The crucial element is a common store of traditions, myths, and aspirations handed down orally over generations. In both cases, it was contact with written culture through their schooling, that permitted this deeply rooted deposit of oral culture to emerge.

Yet again, Ginzburg giveth; Ginzburg taketh away.

In a note on pages 168 and 169 concerning the text’s discussion of Scolio’s poem, there is a short clarification of a reference to Mohammed on page 113. Finally, in a note on page 169 Ginzburg connects Scolio’s description of paradise (pp. 116–117 in the main text) and relates it to both Islamic views about

paradise and the land of Cockaigne, which was a recurring theme about the afterlife in a land of plenty that was current in Menocchio's time.

The Cheese and the Worms is thus studded with references to the Koran and Mohammed. There are also a fair number of references to Turks and to Jews.¹⁸ As we have noted, Ginzburg does not ignore them, but rather dismisses them. We were struck by the times that Ginzburg does not pursue leads that might connect Menocchio with Islam. It is as if he brings himself to the precipice of unthinkability, then gingerly steps away and reverses himself — this procedure is evident in his text on pages 43, 116, and 117 and only a little less so on pages 107 and 108. On these three occasions, he downplays the likelihood that the “most beautiful book” could have been the Koran and instead attempts to connect Menocchio's “vanities and dreams ... suggesting through lengthy and great leaps influences of the Lutherans, Anabaptist and centuries of peasant radicalism”.¹⁹ On the one hand, then, Ginzburg champions an approach that pays heed to exclusions and silences with regard to the history of popular culture — “this deeply rooted deposit of oral culture” — yet, paradoxically, on the other, this vantage point is forsaken when it comes to his own treatment of Islamic influences in Menocchio's testimony. The oral culture in question is never specified, but rather is described in the most general terms.²⁰ Ginzburg's argument is characterized by his unwillingness to pursue the repeated references made to Turks, Islam, and the Koran. Ginzburg excludes this line of inquiry because he believes that it would have been connected to a text that was “so foreign to his [Menocchio's] experience and culture [that it] would have been incomprehensible to him — and would have led him for this very reason to project his own thoughts and fantasies onto the page” (p. 108). This is, quite simply, circular reasoning. Furthermore, references to Islam and the Koran in Menocchio's testimony are neither fleeting nor obscure.

“A Link in a Chain”

“In prison, dreams have no limits and reality is no curb. Intelligence in chains loses in lucidity what it gains in intensity.”²¹ One of the central tasks in Ginz-

18 Testimony relating to Jews is not what concerns us and so will not be examined.

19 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 106.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. xvii–xviii. Besides John Martin (“Journeys to the World of the Dead”), a number of the book's reviewers have also remarked upon Ginzburg's failure to identify the contours of this oral popular culture: Paola Zambelli, “From Menocchio to Piero Della Francesca: The Work of Carlo Ginzburg”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 28 (1985), pp. 983–999; J. H. Elliott, “Rats or Cheese?”, *New York Review of Books* (June 26, 1980), pp. 38–39; Valerio Valeri, “Book Review”, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 54 (1982), pp. 139–143; Samuel Cohn, Jr., “Book Review”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 12 (1982), pp. 523–525; Dominick LaCapra, “*The Cheese and the Worms*: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian”, in *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 45–69; Del Col, “Introduction”, *Domenico Scandella*, especially pp. iv–lviii.

21 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York, 1954), p. 32. It should be mentioned that in this excerpt Camus is writing about the “metaphysical revolt” of the Marquis de Sade. Quoting this passage does not mean that we wish to equate Menocchio's intellectual defiance of clerical hegemony with Sade's vision of

burg's book is a detailed analysis of Menocchio's thought in relation to the books mentioned in the trial record. In speaking out against his superiors, Menocchio stated, "The majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to everyone: to Christians, to heretics, to Turks and Jews, and they are all dear to him and are all saved equally." Because every man could be saved through his own religion, a Turk was right to remain a Turk.²² Moreover, Ginzburg himself tells us that the Koran was available in a vernacular translation that was published in Venice in 1547.²³ Here, it is relevant to mention the Duke's reply to Brabantio's charges that Othello, the Moor of Venice, had bewitched his daughter, Desdemona:

To vouch this is no proof,
Without more wider and more overt test
Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods
Of modern seeming do prefer against him.²⁴

In returning to Menocchio's testimony, we try to provide a concordance

domination and servitude; rather, we mean to compare their ideas solely as acts of resistance to untrammelled authoritarian power. Resistance in sixteenth-century Venetian Friuli and in eighteenth-century France occurred in very different mental universes; likewise, the options available to a village miller and the descendant of a feudal lineage were equally dissimilar. Nonetheless, the point remains that, in their own ways, both Domenico Scandella and Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, insistently spoke their own metaphysical truths to power.

22 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 43, 132–133, also 58. Another miller, called by the nickname of "Pighino", echoed Menocchio's belief regarding the commitment of each "of the Hebrew or Turkish" to their faith. To make sense of these echoes in this other miller's tale, Ginzburg connects Pighino's remarks with the *Fioretto della Bibbia* and then forges a link between the villagers of Friuli and Ferrara to assert that a common oral tradition was available to both Menocchio and Pighino (*The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 125).

23 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 167, n. 53 (p. 107). The book was published by Andrea di Giorgio Arrivabene, a third-generation publisher, who was linked to heretical associations and accused of heterodox beliefs in 1549. Arrivabene was questioned by the Venetian Holy Office in June 1551 and denounced again in October 1551 by Anabaptists who lost no love for this "Lutheran". In October 1552 his shop was raided by the Inquisition and he was again questioned about his inventory. The historian of Venetian publishing Paul Grendler links Arrivabene with smuggling networks which trafficked in contraband literature. Other witnesses before the Inquisition in the 1550s testified that Arrivabene held heretical beliefs and offered his shop as a meeting place and post office for dissenters. While he was under suspicion and questioned on several occasions, "Arrivabene was always circumspect; he never committed himself in writing or spoke carelessly." He therefore escaped thorough, unrelenting investigation. Arrivabene, the publisher of the Koran, skated on the thin ice of religious unorthodoxy; compared to many of his compatriots, he was a lucky man — that thin ice did not crack beneath him. Paul Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 103–112. Unfortunately, Grendler mentions that Arrivabene published the Italian-language version of the Koran in passing; he never adds to his simple declaratory statement. Is this another missing link?

24 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello. The Moor of Venice*, Act I, Scene iii, pp. 106–109. We would like to thank Ed Hundert for suggesting that we have another look at the way that the linkage between Venice and the Islamic world was understood by the Renaissance's finest mind by rereading the Bard of Avon's tragedy.

showing parallels between the Friulian miller's words and a textual tradition that was not so foreign to his experience after all. In contrast to Ginzburg's special pleading concerning the correspondences between Menocchio's mental universe and the silences of a long-dead popular culture, we suggest that it may be possible to trace some of Menocchio's fantasies to another source. The missing link in reconstituting Menocchio's mental universe can perhaps be found by taking seriously Father Carboni's hearsay evidence that Simon the Jew had told him that Menocchio's "most beautiful book" "must be the *Koran*". Our point of departure is the preceding examination of Ginzburg's treatment of pertinent information from Menocchio's trial. What comes through clearly is that Ginzburg has filtered the evidence through his own vision of the thinkable — and the unthinkable — and, in so doing, has excluded some important evidence; or, at the very least, Ginzburg has failed to follow the multiple leads scattered throughout the two trials. Faced with these dilemmas, Ginzburg provides weak arguments and makes some gigantic speculative leaps not only to exclude Islamic influences but also to make connections with a deep stratum of popular culture whose existence must be taken on faith.²⁵ In contrast to Ginzburg's exclusionary position with regard to the Islamic influences that resonate in Menocchio's thought — and in the hearsay evidence attributed to his acquaintance, Simon the Jew — we adopt the exact opposite strategy. We have quite deliberately isolated a series of the references made to Menocchio's heretical beliefs and then tried to locate corresponding chapters and verses of the Islamic holy book.

Menocchio challenged the authenticity of the Scripture, arguing that "this baptism is an invention.... As for the sacrament of the Eucharist it is a way of governing men devised by men through the Holy Spirit.... I believe that the Holy Scripture was given by God, but was then added to by men. ...As for the things in the Gospels, I believe that some parts are true and some the evangelists made up out of their own heads."²⁶ The following verse drawn from the Koran may give an insight into how Menocchio had captured its very essence: "Therefore, woe be unto those who write the Scripture with their hands and then say, This is from God, that they may purchase a small gain therewith."²⁷

Secondly, Menocchio's discussion about Christ's crucifixion and mortality²⁸ resonates in the Koranic verse: "And remember when God said: Oh Jesus! Lo! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto me and am cleansing thee of those who disbelieve and setting those who follow thee above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection."²⁹ The Koran

25 It is important to make it clear that we are not disagreeing with Ginzburg's conjectural methods; rather we think that he has aimed his conjectural arrows at the wrong target. We will return to this issue below.

26 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 44; see also p. 131.

27 M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: New American Library, n.d.), p. 39.

28 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 25, 37.

29 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 67.

compares the humanness of Adam with Christ: “Lo the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then God said unto him Be! and he is.”³⁰

Thirdly, Menocchio’s rejection of the Trinity³¹ is captured in the Koranic verse:

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter ought concerning God save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a Messenger of God and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers and say not “Three” — Cease! [it is] better for you. God is only one God. For it is removed from his transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the Heavens and all that is in the earth.³²

Menocchio’s thoughts can be connected more readily with this text than with the Lutheran or Anabaptist beliefs, which Ginzburg considers but ultimately rejects in favour of “glimpses [of] the massive presence of different and much more ancient traditions ... a substratus of peasant beliefs, perhaps centuries old, that were never totally wiped out ... an autonomous current of peasant radicalism, which the upheaval of the Reformation had helped bring forth, but which was much older”.³³ In contrast to Ginzburg’s speculative postulation, it seems more likely that these Koranic verses had made some fundamental theological statements to Menocchio: they rejected the divinity of Christ, the crucifixion, and original sin; and they completely denied the special status of the clergy and church hierarchies, the sacraments, and the veneration of relics, which were all central to contemporary Catholicism. Furthermore, the sweeping rejection of these religious verities would have been hard to square with any version of Christianity that was circulating at that time except, perhaps, some diluted form of thirteenth-century Catharism that had been forced underground, decaying and disintegrating in the face of Inquisitorial challenges.

It is apposite to mention at this point that Andrea Del Col, the scholar who has edited and published the documents relating to Menocchio’s two trials, argues that “Menocchio’s religious world has a definite structure, a logic of its very own.” Del Col believes that this correspondence seems to be con-

30 *Ibid.*

31 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 26–27.

32 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 94.

33 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 18–21. It is interesting to note that it is this section in which Ginzburg first draws the reader’s attention to Simon the Jew’s suggestion that Menocchio “had praised a book that may have been the Koran”. Having acknowledged this piece of testimony, Ginzburg immediately slides past it by writing, “We would appear to be very far from Luther and his doctrine. All this compels us to return to the point of departure and begin again, proceeding cautiously one step at a time.” This is good advice, but Ginzburg does not heed it. He does not return to the stepping-stone or point of departure expressly revealed by the hearsay evidence attributed to Simon.

firmed by the fact that “[a]long with the Cathars, Menocchio denies any value to the Church, to the hierarchy, to the sacraments, to ecclesiastical precepts and injunctions. However, he admits their validity, in opposition to classic Catharism, if and when they are vehicles for the Holy Spirit.” Still, Del Col proceeds to argue, “There are a few general lines in common, but also a substantial and irreconcilable differences, between the broad range of ideas of modern Cathar dualism and the miller’s cosmogony.” Indeed, as far as Del Col is concerned, “Menocchio is not a Cathar.” Rather, “The miller of Montreale is a link in a chain, but for the moment the other links are not apparent; it is impossible to know how many and who were those who developed and transmitted the doctrinal variants and transformations in Catharism.” Del Col then adds, “As for the theory that ideas were passed on orally, it is unlikely that Menocchio is an isolated case and that no other evidence, either medieval or modern, should exist.” However, Del Col is not able to point to that other evidence — links in a chain — although he is optimistic that, even though “some preliminary soundings made in the inquisitorial archives have been fruitless”, further research will bear out his hypotheses. Like Ginzburg, Del Col does not follow up the evidence that starts with Simon the Jew’s suggestion that Menocchio was familiar with the Koran.³⁴

Fourthly, Menocchio attested during his trial, “Abraham cast down all idols and all images and adored only one God.”³⁵ His words are almost eerily similar to the Koranic verse stating, “Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered [to God], and he was not of the idolaters.... By God I will circumvent your idols ... then he reduced them to fragments.”³⁶

Fifthly, Menocchio admitted to the inquisitors that he had read a book called the *Lucidario Della Madonna*, which gave an heretical explanation of the Virgin Mary’s activities at the time of the virgin birth. Though confused, Menocchio may have seen an image that had been deeply suggestive to him in a fresco “executed in 1566 by a follower of Pordenone, Calderari, on the walls of the church of St. Rocco in Montreale”.³⁷ But, in considering Menocchio’s ideas about this cornerstone of Christian religion, it is relevant to mention that he may have read the Koran where it is written that Jesus was a prophet and a man, which also found an echo in his words: “He spoke: Lo! I am the slave of God. He hath giveth me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet, And hath made me blessed wherever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and alms-giving so long as I remain alive.”³⁸

34 Del Col, “Introduction”, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. I, lxvii, lxxi, lxxviii.

35 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 44.

36 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 238.

37 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 34.

38 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 222.

The theme of Christ's divinity is discussed again when Ginzburg hypothesizes about a link between Michael Servetus's writings and Menocchio's loquacious discursions on his own beliefs; having raised this suggestive possibility, Ginzburg explains it away by acknowledging that the Spanish physician's writings were widely circulated in Italy during the sixteenth century but that Menocchio has cast "rough explanations" at the villagers as a "conscious attempt to translate the obscure Servetian ideas [about the Holy Spirit], as he had understood them, into something that would be comprehensible to ignorant listeners".³⁹ However, if Ginzburg had checked the Koran he might have made a smaller leap to see the similarities on this particular subject:

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! God hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above [all] the women of creation. [And remember] when the angels said: O Mary! God giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near [unto God]. He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel.⁴⁰

Menocchio responded at great length to the vicar general, explaining that to love a neighbour was greater than to love God. Ginzburg suggests that Menocchio had been influenced by the *Historia del Guidicio*.⁴¹ An alternative possibility could have been presented by following the recorded oral tradition of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam:

O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found [the reward for doing so] with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found [the reward for doing so] with Me.⁴²

39 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 67.

40 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 66.

41 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 37.

42 E. Ibrahim and D. Johnson-Davies, *Forty Hadith Qudsi* (Stuttgart, 1980), pp. 88–89.

There is an incredible similarity between this recorded oral tradition and the words quoted from *Historia del giudicio* by Menocchio, such as, "I was hungry and you did not feed me, I was thirsty and you did not give me drink."⁴³ Ginzburg was correct that Menocchio's "interpretation was triggered by contact with his text, and its roots had distant origins", but the linkages do not appear to be the ones Ginzburg has attempted to trace.⁴⁴

Menocchio talked about the law being given to the Christians, Jews, and Turks.⁴⁵ This is confirmed in the Koranic text in the following way: "He hath revealed unto thee [Muhammed] the Scripture with truth confirming that which was revealed before it even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel."⁴⁶ Ginzburg's supposition that Menocchio may have gained this idea from reading an uncensored edition of a text by Mandeville is not plausible. Mandeville considered Christianity to be the truth.⁴⁷ In contrast, the Koranic verse supports Menocchio's egalitarian approach to the three faiths.

Ginzburg attributes Menocchio's description of paradise to Mandeville's travel stories rather than checking the Koran as a primary source.⁴⁸ Had he done so, he would have located Koranic verses in which paradise is explained as follows:

Lo! Those who kept their duty dwell in gardens and delight, Happy because of what the Lord hath given them, and [because] their Lord hath warded off from them the torment of hell fire. [And it is said unto them]: Eat and drink in health [as reward] for what ye used to do, Reclining on ranged couches. And We wed them unto fair ones with wide, lovely eyes. And they who believe and whose seed follow them in faith, We cause their seed to join them [there], and We deprive them of naught of their [life's] work. Every man is a pledge for that which he hath earned. And We provide them with fruit and meat such as they desire. There they pass from hand to hand a cup wherein is neither vanity nor cause of sin. And there go round, waiting on them menservants of their own, as they were hidden pearls.⁴⁹

At another place in the sacred text of Islam, it is stated:

43 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 36.

44 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 40–41.

45 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, pp. 43, 58.

46 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 375.

47 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 54.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 76. Ginzburg's exclusionary viewpoint towards connections with Islam is rather surprising given the fact that a few pages earlier he states, "Menocchio's peasant paradise probably took more from the Mohammedan (rather than the Christian) hereafter about which he had read in Mandeville's lively description" (p. 77). In other words, Ginzburg does not allow that Menocchio, the village miller of Montereale, could have had any contact with the Koran, the sacred text of Islam. Ginzburg thus presents us with arguments to fit the evidence rather than taking advantage of Occam's Razor — and cutting directly to the point — with a much simpler explanation.

49 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 375.

Lo! for the duteous is achievement Gardens enclosed and vineyards, And maidens for companions, And a full cup. There hear they never vain discourse, nor lying. Requital from thy Lord a gift in payment Lord of the heavens and the earth, and [all] that is between them, the Beneficent; with Whom none can converse. On the day when the angels and the Spirit stand arrayed, they speak not, saving him whom the Beneficent alloweth and who speaketh right. That is the True Day. So who so will should seek recourse unto his Lord.⁵⁰

These Koranic verses embellish Menocchio's vision of the afterlife as a pleasant and just abode. Words such as "vineyards", "menservants", "fruit", and "meats" resonate in Menocchio's vision of a peasant paradise which is "a place that surrounds the entire world, and that from there all the things of the world can be seen, even the fish in the sea. And for those who are in that place it is like when we celebrate a feast day in this world...."⁵¹

Menocchio gave his inquisitors a detailed account of Joseph's trials in Egypt.⁵² Ginzburg, looking for textual antecedents for the miller's ideas, draws the reader's attention to Matthew 22: 36–40⁵³ and also to Mandeville's *Travels*. Yet again, a simpler lineage might have been presented by referring the reader to the following Koranic text:

And the king said: Lo! I saw in a dream seven fat kine which seven lean were eating, and seven green ears of corn and other [seven] dry. O notables! Expound for me my vision, if ye can interpret dreams. They answered: Jumbled dreams! And we are not knowing in the interpretation of dreams. And he of the two who was released, and [now] at length remembered, said: I am going to announce unto you the interpretation, therefore send me forth. [And when he came to Joseph in the prison, he exclaimed]: Joseph! O thou truthful one! Expound for us the seven fat kine which seven lean were eating and the seven green ears of corn and other [seven] dry, that I may return unto the people, so that they may know. He said: Ye shall sow seven years as usual, but that which ye reap, leave it in the ear, all save a little which ye eat. Then after that will come seven hard years which will devour all that ye have prepared for them, save a little of that which ye have stored. Then, after that, will come a year when the people will have plenteous crops and when they will press [wine and oil].

And the King said: Bring him unto me that I may attach him to my person. And when he had talked with him he said: Lo! thou art today our presence established and trusted. He said: Set me over the storehouses of the land. Lo! I am a skilled custodian. Thus gave We power to Joseph in the land. He was the

50 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 427.

51 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 54.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

53 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 90–91.

owner of it where he pleased. We reach with our mercy whom We will. We lose not the reward of the good. And the reward of the Hereafter is better, for those who believe and ward off [evil]. And Joseph's brethren came and presented themselves before him, and he knew them but they knew him not. And when he provided them with their provision he said: Bring unto me a brother of yours from your father. See ye not that I fill up the measure and I am the best of hosts? ... And when they went in before Joseph, he took his brother unto himself, saying: Lo; I, even I, am thy brother, therefore sorrow not for what they did ... And when they came in before Joseph, he took his parents unto him, and said: Come into Egypt safe, if God will!⁵⁴

Menocchio's letter to his judges addressed the dreams, the cows, the famine, the brothers, and Joseph's reconciliation with his family. There are many details that are similar. Through this comparison, Ginzburg could have extended Menocchio's readings beyond the Bible and the *Fioretto della Bibbia*.

Ginzburg gives prominence to the "unknown rustic in the Lucchese countryside who hid behind the pseudonym Scolio and spoke of his visions in a long, still unpublished poem, the *Settenario*". Quotation from this text "hammers away at its central argument that the various religions have a common base in the Ten Commandments" and that God has had many prophets.⁵⁵ Here, too, Menocchio's testimony echoed Koranic verses on the prophets and their genealogy:

Say [O Muhammad]: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered....⁵⁶

Lo! We inspire thee as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as we imparted unto David the Psalms.⁵⁷

Finally, the Koran reaffirms the writings of the *Settenario* by claiming, "He hath revealed unto thee [Muhammad] the Scripture with truth, confirming that which was [revealed] before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel."⁵⁸

54 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, pp. 176–178.

55 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 112–113.

56 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, p. 69.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Menocchio's idea of the absolute monotheism of God is affirmed in the following Koranic verse: "Say: He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him."⁵⁹

Ginzburg suggests that, in making sense of Menocchio's distinction between a mortal soul and an immortal spirit, "we must go back to the discussions on the problem of the immortality of the soul that began in Averroist circles during the first decades of the sixteenth century". Ginzburg waves the Averroesian flag but he only considers that neo-Islamic philosophy had a life of its own in Menocchio's time among the "Averroist circles during the first decades of the sixteenth century, especially among the faculty of the University of Padua, who had been influenced by the thought of Pietro Pomponazzi".⁶⁰ The link between these Padovan academics and Menocchio might have been Giovanni Daniele Melchiori, the priest of the neighbouring Friulian town of Polcenigo, who had been Menocchio's childhood friend.⁶¹ Paola Zambelli suggests that Ginzburg downplays "one particular strand of oral tradition" which linked university professors such as Pomponazzi "to their audience, comprising not only future university professors, but also friars, physicians and others who would later return to their provincial surroundings to popularize, perhaps by distorting or simplifying slightly, what they had heard at Bologna or Padua".⁶²

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

⁶⁰ Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 72. This point is developed much further by Paola Zambelli, who argues that, in regard to Christ's humanity, Menocchio is "very close to the words of Averroes' *Destructio*" rather than to the models proposed by Anabaptists. Furthermore, Zambelli notes, "Menocchio always refers to religions as 'laws' in the same way as Averroes does, and believes their value to be relative." Zambelli, "From Menocchio to Piero Della Francesca", p. 993, n. 19.

⁶¹ Melchiori had also been prosecuted for heresy in 1579–1580 (Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 73). Del Col notes that "the judicial situation of the priest of Polcenigo was extremely delicate, because in 1576 he had been tried by Fra Giulio Columberto and by the vicar general Camillo Cauzio for heretical utterances, magical arts and giving comfort to heretics. The case had been reopened in 1579 by the same inquisitor and by the acting vicar Maro, continued by Fra Felice [the hammer of Menocchio] and the vicar general Scipione Bonaverio and concluded on appeal at Venice on 29 November 1580 with a sentence reconciling him to the Church based on a light suspicion of heresy. The dossier was massive, over a hundred pages, and the two judges of 1584 remembered the affair well." Del Col, "Introduction", *Domenico Scandella*, pp. lxxxv–lxxxvi.

⁶² Zambelli, "From Menocchio to Piero Della Francesca", p. 994. On the next page, Zambelli writes that "the core of Menocchio's *ideas* has a lively and critical, but undeniable, connexion with some of the advanced trends in contemporary high culture, even those of the Florentine academy and the school of Padua. He was not unaware of them; he had an instinctive knowledge of the conflicts and inbreeding which occurred in the works of those intellectuals. It was not only by a 'surprising coincidence' that he reiterated their fundamental *ideas*: 'he simply translated them into images that corresponded to his experiences, to his aspirations, to his fantasies' (p. 112, *The Cheese and the Worms*). Why, then, deny that he really was a 'philosopher, astrologer and prophet'?" Although Zambelli joins us in looking for other linkages to connect Menocchio to contemporary cultural discussions, she looks in different places and comes up with different answers. The intellectual fraternity to which the miller of Montereale belonged becomes even more of a mysterious puzzle wrapped in an enigma. Will the 'real Menocchio' please stand up?

Rather than working back through the neo-Islamic connections that Melchiori offers, Ginzburg goes off in another direction to connect the distinction between the mortal soul and the immortal spirit to Anabaptist influences. Had he not steadfastly refused to consider the possibility that Menocchio's thought had Islamic roots, Ginzburg would have made it clear to his readers that Averroes (1126–1198), whose Muslim name was Ibn Rushd, wrote a commentary on the *De Partibus animalium* and *De generatione animalium*. Furthermore, Ibn Rushd translated Aristotle and provided excellent commentaries on his work which reconciled the thoughts of Aristotle with the Koran. In this guise, Ibn Rushd and other prominent Muslim philosophers presented alternatives to Christian doctrines related to immortality and creation. This might be another source for considering the origins of some of Menocchio's heretical comments, quite independent of the deeply rooted sub-stratus of peasant beliefs, Anabaptism, or other forms of radical Christianity.

Ginzburg is certainly correct in connecting Menocchio's world view to his reading. In *The Cheese and the Worms*, he is able to demonstrate that many of Menocchio's opinions, allegations, and convictions had very definite origins in the books he had read. Yet Ginzburg never clarifies the content of the age-old oral traditions onto which Menocchio is supposed to have grafted this reading material. Indeed, this deeply rooted sub-stratus of primordial belief is unexamined. Since Menocchio's connections with this perdurant oral culture are never elucidated, its impact on his particular understanding of the books he has read is asserted, not demonstrated. On the other hand, as the preceding discussion suggests, some of Menocchio's atypical ideas — about monotheism, Christ's humanity and the Virgin birth, the authenticity of the Gospels, and paradise — would seem to have had their origins in his reading of the sacred text of Islam. Steeped in sixteenth-century art and social history, Ginzburg has failed to look beyond its borders.

Faced with conflicting results from his collection of evidence, Ginzburg retreats to the familiar ground of the sixteenth-century library rather than consider alternative linkages, which would have meant taking seriously Simon the Jew's statement to Father Michele Carboni that Menocchio's "most beautiful book" was, in fact, the Koran. Ginzburg's writing about the miller of Montereale's ideas is thus informed by his academic training which taught him to give absolute priority to certain kinds of documentary evidence — the written text or published image. We believe that his explanation of the roots of Menocchio's thought is partial because he seems to be unable — or unwilling — to step out of the traditional historian's practice. This strategy is doubly odd: first, because he speculates that Menocchio's reading was conditioned by his mental preconceptions, which were themselves orchestrated by the miller's unspecified relationship to an undefined oral culture; and, secondly, because he has been praised for guarding against overly elaborated circular arguments with what has been called "Ginzburg's razor", the strict rule that must be imposed on the use of conjectures: "other

things being equal, the interpretation requiring the fewest hypotheses should generally be taken as the most probable.”⁶³

Aristotelian Observations, Brechtian Questions⁶⁴ and Holmesian History

Ginzburg’s text-bound approach to oral culture excludes possibilities that should have been considered when trying to make sense of a man who, in the words of one of his neighbours, “is always looking for the chance to talk about these things”.⁶⁵ More significantly, it is only by undertaking an archeology of the silence that continues to surround Menocchio that we can begin to make sense of his familiarity with the Islamic verses. An historical archaeology of this silence is an inherently problematic approach to the social experience of living in the past, as Ginzburg himself recognizes:

[T]his leap, this direct contact with reality can take place only on the terrain of invention. It is precluded by definition to the historian who only has at his disposal the fragments of things and documents. The historiographical frescoes that seek to communicate to the reader, through expedients frequently mediocre, the illusion of a vanished reality, tacitly remove this constituent limitation of the historical profession. Microhistory chooses the opposite approach. It accepts the limitations while exploring their gnoseological implications and transforming them into a narrative element.⁶⁶

If our inferences relating Menocchio’s ideas to Islamic sources are given credence, then they raise another issue whose resolution will be every bit as conjectural as Ginzburg’s hypotheses relating the “distant origins” of the miller’s mental universe to an independent, subterranean peasant culture. The key issue that we need to address is quite straightforward: How did Domenico Scandella, nicknamed Menocchio, a miller from the obscure Friulian town of Montereale, gain access to the Koran? Answering that straightforward question is not a simple matter. Here again, we think that Ginzburg

63 Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, “Introduction”, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. xix. They are quoting Salvatore Settis, *La Tempesta interpretata* (Turin, 1978), p. 73.

64 We are thinking here of Bertholdt Brecht’s brilliant poem, “Questions from a Worker who Reads”, printed in John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertholdt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956* (London, 1976), pp. 252–253. Ginzburg himself suggests that his own Damascus Road conversion to microhistorical research was prompted by Tolstoy’s conviction that “a historical phenomenon can become comprehensible only by reconstructing the activities of *all* [emphasis added] the persons who participated in it”. Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20 (1993), p. 24. In Ginzburg’s response to Tolstoy there is more than just an echo of the seventeenth-century Levellers’ claim that “the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he”.

65 Testimony of Ser Giulio, son of the deceased Stefanut, quoted in Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 13.

66 Ginzburg, “Microhistory”, p. 28. For those, like us, who were puzzled by the word “gnoseological”, it refers to “the philosophy of cognition or the cognitive faculties” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

(and Del Col, too, for that matter) have not followed several hints that are scattered in the inquisitional record of Menocchio's two trials. First of all, Menocchio talked to anyone and everyone, all the time. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, he lived 100 kilometres from Venice, a very, very long day's walk from his native village in central Friuli.⁶⁷ Menocchio needs to be situated in time and space and, to do that, we need to understand the context within which he might have operated. We will try to do that by imbricating Menocchio in a palimpsest of convergent possibilities. In the end, however, an archaeology of that historical silence can only be attempted by keeping Aristotle's observation in the mind's eye: "A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility."

Late sixteenth-century Venice is the key to our conjectures. Venice was perhaps the richest — certainly the most cosmopolitan and multicultural — city in Renaissance Europe. The home of the original *ghetto*, the lagoon city housed substantial communities of Italian and North African Jews who had been joined after 1492 by Portuguese and Spanish refugees, Germans from every part of the Holy Roman Empire, native-born Venetians as well as other Italians from many parts of the peninsula whose homelands stretched down the Adriatic coast, not just the immediate *terrafirma*, Greeks, Croats, Slovenes, Slavs, Hungarians, Armenians, Albanians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and representatives of many other groups who had migrated to Venice in search of work from around the Mediterranean basin.

Venice was, of course, married to the sea; and every year its *doge* re-enacted this symbolic union. For centuries the business of Venice was business,⁶⁸ particularly connected with the trade in spices and silks from the East, through Asia Minor. Furthermore, during Menocchio's lifetime — and especially his adult years, from around 1550 until his first trial in 1583 — Venice was engaged in an ongoing series of battles against the resurgent forces of the Ottoman Empire to maintain the last vestiges of its far-flung possessions in the eastern Mediterranean. The numbers of combatants in these maritime battles were quite incredible; Fernand Braudel suggests, "Naval war between 1571 and 1573 sent, aboard the 500 or 600 galleys both Christian and Moslem, 150,000 to 200,000 men to sea, not counting those immobilized on land, in ports and arsenals."⁶⁹ The War of Cyprus may have

67 Montebelluna was located close to the system of roads that had, for centuries — even millennia — connected Northeastern Italy to the Alpine passes that led to the heartland of Central Europe.

68 On this point, see the stimulating comments by Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990–1990* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 145ff.

69 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (London, 1973), vol. 2, p. 841, n. 15. Among the Venetian *arsenalotti*, service was onerous in times of war when they were "sent abroad to serve the state aboard the galleys they had helped to build. In 1629, out of a total of 1,320 enrolled shipbuilders, 490 (or 37 percent) were away at sea; in 1645, the percentage was about the same — 516 out of 1,366 masters — but with the Candia War, which began that year, over half the *arsenalotti* would be sent out with the fleet." Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 105.

ended ingloriously for the Republic of St. Mark, but the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 had been a great, if Pyrrhic, victory for the outmanned Christians. Huge numbers of Ottoman ships and Islamic men were captured at Lepanto. Indeed, over the long centuries of incessant maritime warfare, many Venetians had been imprisoned by the Turks and, of course, many Turks found themselves sold into a virtual slavery as Venetian captives. If the treaty that ended the War of Cyprus meant that hostilities were suspended between the main combatants in the Mediterranean, piracy — “that secondary form of war” — increased its activities to fill the void. Venetian ships and Venetian sailors were the pirates’ primary targets.⁷⁰

For generations before Menocchio’s day, the Venetian population, as well as the men who were recruited from the *terrafirma* to man oars on its galleys, had a long history of commercial co-existence and military struggle with the Ottoman Muslims and, before them, the Byzantine Christians. Indeed, it is not too much to say that, even before Venetian *Doge* Enrico Dandolo diverted the forces of the Fourth Crusade to sack Constantinople in 1204, the destinies of Venice and Turkey were two sides of the same coin. Any and every Venetian could hardly fail to be reminded of this connection whenever he (or she) entered the Piazza San Marco and looked at the magnificent statues which had been plundered centuries before. Moreover, the four bronze horses flanking the cathedral’s main doors, which had originally adorned the Hippodrome of Constantinople since Constantine’s time, had become part of Venetian self-consciousness. These statues had been pillaged while Constantinople was the headquarters of the Byzantine Empire, but from the mid-fifteenth century the great city on the Bosphorus had been renamed — Istanbul — when it became the Ottoman capital. Furthermore, the Lion of San Marco, long held to be the symbol of the Republic, was, in the words of the architectural historian Richard Goy, “oriental” in both its provenance and its imaginative effect.⁷¹ For centuries, then, Venetian architecture had been more strongly influenced by Eastern styles — first Byzantine and then Turkish and Arabic — than Western conventions. The East was something more than a reification of otherness in Venetians’ minds.⁷² The mute stones spoke, and they spoke of a historically constructed identity which the *La Serenissima*, rising on the tens of thousands of wooden stilts, pile-driven into the clay beneath its lagoons, had built itself from a millennium of trade, warfare, diplomacy, and human intercourse with the East. For centuries, Venetians had had their *fondaco* in Turkish and Levantine cities where their merchants spent years living among Muslims. The cessation of hostilities in the War of Cyprus included peace terms which obliged the Venetians “to admit Turkish subjects (including Levantine Jews) as traders to the city”.⁷³ During Menocchio’s lifetime,

70 Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. 2, p. 865.

71 Richard Goy, *Venice: The City and its Architecture* (London, 1997), p. 70.

72 Deborah Howard, *Venice and the East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), *passim*.

73 Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550–1670* (Totowa, N.J., 1983), p. 184.

then, Islamic men came to reside in Venice as part of their own import/export businesses. Was there also an officially sanctioned Moslem *ghetto* in Venice?

The key point is that we cannot look at Menocchio's experience through blinkered eyes; he cannot be considered to have been isolated — under a veritable house arrest, in his village prison — bereft of communications with the larger, outside world. Furthermore, Menocchio was not really a peasant even though he lived in the midst of a peasant society. He may have farmed a few fields, but he identified himself as a “miller, carpenter, sawyer, builder of walls and other things”.⁷⁴ Among these “other things”, Menocchio went “around playing the cithara [guitar] on feast days”.⁷⁵ He was also “mayor and rector”, “administrator of the parish”, and “a tithe collector”.⁷⁶ Even after his imprisonment he went on doing parochial administrative jobs; indeed, he said that he often did not wear his penitential costume because “I was losing many earnings not being called to do assessments and other jobs that I can do, because men considered me excommunicated when they saw the garment, and so I do not wear it.”⁷⁷ Menocchio was thus positioned ambivalently in relation to peasant society; he was from the peasantry but not completely of the peasantry.

Menocchio's social ambivalence was paralleled by his liminal status with regard to oral culture. In contrast to Ginzburg's reiteration of the miller's orality — which is conceptualized in terms of a “much more ancient tradition”, “a substratus of peasant beliefs perhaps centuries old”, “an autonomous current of peasant radicalism”, “a common store of traditions, myths, and aspirations handed down orally over the generations”, and “this deeply rooted deposit of oral culture”⁷⁸ — Menocchio was an avid reader. Ginzburg tries to square this circle by suggesting that the key to “the aggressive originality of Menocchio's reading” was based on an oral tradition: “this screen, this key to his reading, continually leads us back to a culture that is very different from the one expressed on the printed page — one based on an oral

74 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 23. While others identified Menocchio as a miller, it is interesting to note that in his own testimony he did not seem to have recourse to metaphors relating to that trade to explain himself to the inquisitors, whereas he does use references to carpentry to make his point: “I will tell you how it is: these seven things are given by God to man in the same way as to a carpenter who wants to build things. So just as a carpenter with a hatchet and a saw, wood and other instruments does his work, so God has given something to man so that he can also do his work; and not doing his work, there is no value at all.” Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 50. Again, “just as someone who is building a house uses workers and helpers, but we say that he built it. Similarly, in making the world God used the angels, but we say that God make it. And just as that master carpenter in building the house could also do it by himself, but it would take longer, so God in making the world could have done it by himself, but over a longer period of time.” Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 57.

75 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 110; see also p. 122. This point is expanded by Dominick LaCapra, who notes that Menocchio's playing at feasts “could be seen as carnivalesque”. LaCapra, “*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian*”, p. 47.

76 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 29.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

78 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 20–21, 117.

tradition.”⁷⁹ Yet he also writes, “He [Menocchio] had read only a few books and these largely by chance. He had chewed upon and squeezed meaning out of every word in these books. He pondered them for years; for years words and phrases had fermented in his memory.”⁸⁰ The point is, however, as Dominick LaCapra notes, Menocchio’s “special regard for a book ... ill accords with the thesis of the primordially of oral, peasant culture.”⁸¹

Menocchio thus did not spend his life incarcerated in “the green purgatory of rural society.”⁸² Indeed, Menocchio’s testimony in his first trial speaks very directly to this point: interrogated on Tuesday, February 7, 1584, he is reported to have replied, “I recall saying those words to a Francesco Fasseta, but I do not remember saying them to others, and I told him this *coming from Venice to Montereale last March* [emphasis added].”⁸³ A month later, on Thursday, March 8, 1584, Menocchio replied to another question about his beliefs as follows: “And I said this last May in the year 1583, *returning from Venice with Francesco Fassetta* [emphasis added].”⁸⁴ Indeed, Ser Francesco, son of the deceased Daniele Fasset of the village of Grizzo, in the parish of Montereale, had already told Giovanni Batista Maro, doctor in canon and civil law and vicar general for spiritual and temporal matters, and the reverend brother Fra Andrea da Sant’Erasmo, minor Franciscan, commissioner of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, “Yes sir, I know him [Menocchio] because he is my relative.” Francesco Fassetta was the first witness called by Maro and da Sant’Erasmo; he appeared before them on October 29, 1583, stating, “Already two months ago or more he said these words to me *coming from Venice* [emphasis added].”⁸⁵

These three statements, at one and the same time, speak directly to the point we want to advance, yet they are also inherently confusing. It is clear from Menocchio’s two responses and also from Fassetta’s testimony that they had returned to Montereale from Venice, but it is unclear whether they took one or several trips together. Menocchio gives two different dates (“last March” and “last May in the year 1583”) while Fassetta would seem to offer another one (“two months ago or more”) which appears to refer back to August 1583. So we know that Menocchio went to Venice in 1583; he may even have gone there three times in a six-month period. How many other times did he journey to that great city, the hinge of Europe, the crossroads between East and West?

The miller of Montereale is also familiar with “those who go to the Piazza

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸¹ LaCapra, “*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian*”, p. 53.

⁸² This splendid phrase is borrowed from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, “Rétif de la Bretonne as a Social Anthropologist: Rural Burgundy in the Eighteenth Century”, in *The Mind and Method of the Historian* (Chicago, 1981), p. 215.

⁸³ Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

San Marco”⁸⁶ on a pilgrimage of some sort. Furthermore, he told his examiners on Thursday, February 16, 1584, that he had bought one of his books, *Il fioreto de la Bibia*, “in Venice for two soldi”.⁸⁷ A book selling for “two soldi” was a bargain;⁸⁸ from Paul Grendler’s list of 125 books published in Venice by Giolito between 1549 and 1591, it would seem that only one had a retail price this low.⁸⁹ Retail prices varied by the book’s length and size; perhaps Menocchio bought *Il fioreto de la Bibia* second-hand? Around this time there were between 30 and 50 publishers who produced at least one title in any given year; altogether there were between 15,000 and 17,500 different books published in sixteenth-century Venice. As many as 500 men worked at different levels in the publishing industry, from the high flyers who had contacts across the continent to “the lowly tradesmen who bought and sold used books from outdoor benches at the Rialto or hawked devotional pamphlets at the doors of San Marco. Too poor to appear on tax records, most members of the book trade have disappeared without trace except when they ran afoul of the Holy Office.”⁹⁰

Menocchio’s Venetian connection is not absent in Ginzburg’s work but, rather, it is mentioned only in passing: “Scolio gives the impression of being confined to a rural environment, without, or virtually without contacts with the city; Menocchio traveled; he made several trips to Venice.”⁹¹ What Menocchio did in Venice, with whom he might have spoken, and what they might have discussed are all questions that are absent from Ginzburg’s account. This is surprising because, in fact, we would argue — contrary to his claims — that Ginzburg did not truly “search the gaps between the written culture of the inquisitors and the oral culture of the accused for the outlines of the popular culture”.⁹² Rather, Ginzburg’s Menocchio is captured in a web of written documents produced by the Holy Office of the Inquisition or else in published works now found in rare book libraries — which means that Menocchio’s oral culture is championed in Ginzburg’s general statements about the nature of his way of doing history rather than being observed in the text of *The Cheese and the Worms*. In addition, a secondary point can be made here about Ginzburg’s claims: he suggests in his “Preface to the Italian Edition” that “even meager, scattered, and obscure documentation can be put to good use”.⁹³

86 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

88 What was the contemporary purchasing power of “two soldi”? The closest evidence we have found relates to early seventeenth-century Venetian prices, and it is important to bear in mind that surging inflation had probably reduced monetary value in the interim. Beef sold for 18 *soldi* per kilo; a capon would fetch 30 *soldi*; and the “heavily flavored *pesci azzuri* (such as mackerel) 2 *soldi* apiece or sardines (8 *soldi* per kilo)”. Davis, *Shipbuilders*, p. 103.

89 Paul Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540–1605* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 12.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

91 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 117.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

93 *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

In his finest essay on method, Ginzburg writes, "Reality is opaque; but there are certain points — clues, signs — which allow us to decipher it." Rather like the hunters who "knew how to read a coherent sequence of events from the silent (though not imperceptible) signs left by their prey", Ginzburg urges the historian to conjecture and to decipher.⁹⁴ We thus reiterate these interconnected clues:

First, Menocchio was talkative. In the words of Francesco Fasset, "He is always disputing with someone over the faith for the sake of argument."⁹⁵ Giovanni Antonio Melchiori of Montereale, who knew Menocchio for several decades, first meeting him "about twenty five years ago", replied that "[e]verybody says that this man talks loosely about matters that pertain to the faith".⁹⁶ Ser Giulio, son of the deceased Stephanut, told the inquisitors at the first trial that Menocchio "is always looking for the chance to talk about these things. ...He is accustomed to introduce with everyone the subject of God and always interjects some sort of heresy and then he argues and shouts in support of his opinion."⁹⁷ Domenico Melchiori confirmed that Menocchio "usually talks about these things when he is in company and on a journey, and he introduces these subjects himself. ...He likes to discuss with this one and that one...."⁹⁸ When Andrea Hionima was pointedly asked about Menocchio's reputation, he replied, "He has become notorious, speaking thus with everyone...."⁹⁹ The reverend Odorico Vorai, priest in the church of Santa Maria in Montereale, told the first set of inquisitors, "He said many times, and I heard this from several people, that if he were not afraid of certain persons in this world, he would say things that would astonish."¹⁰⁰ This same witnesses at his first trial would seem to suggest that his heretical ideas were not new; indeed, Odorico Vorai, who had known Menocchio "for thirty or forty years", told the inquisitors that he had heard him utter heretical statements "many times".¹⁰¹

94 Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method", *History Workshop*, vol. 9 (1980), pp. 27, 13.

95 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 4.

96 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 8. Why didn't Vorai spill the beans on Menocchio earlier? Was his reticence connected to his well-founded fears of Menocchio's kinsmen who, in the event, did harass him and drive him out of Montereale? Or did the fact that he had known Menocchio for so long create a kind of immune response to the miller's statements? It is relevant to note that another witness, Giovanni Foscari, *provveditore* and captain of Pordenone, told the second trial that he had informed "the priest Odorico that he was obliged to denounce him to his superiors". Without this prod, the priest might have kept his own counsel (p. 110). It is also germane to situate the personal relationship between the priest and the miller in a broader context. Del Col suggests that in mid-century Friuli there was "a tranquil acceptance of heretics" which occurred as a result of "protections afforded by members of Friulian noble clans (Spilimbergo, Porcia, Frattina) who had accepted Reformation ideas, communal ties within towns and villages, religious ignorance and indifference". The result was that "People

Yet when Menocchio was being prepared for torture, “to extract the truth from him”, after being found guilty as a relapsed heretic in his second trial, he tried to excuse himself by saying, “I talked with so many people that now I do not remember.” Even when he was confronted with the rope and the pulley, Menocchio repeated this point, saying, “I have thought and tried to imagine with whom I might have talked, but now I am not able to remember.”¹⁰² Of course, one cannot lose sight of Menocchio’s inherent localism — he did not want these dangerous strangers poking any further into the affairs of his family and neighbours. Another point that Menocchio was trying to make to his torturers was, because he was “always looking for the chance to talk about these things”, it was impossible for him to disentangle one conversation from another. Were his conversations essentially monologues? Was the audience really beside the point? A corollary point is that Menocchio’s conversations took place anywhere, everywhere, and in front of anyone. Quite obviously, he liked to hear himself talk. But did that mean that Menocchio did not listen when he encountered someone who was equally loquacious or opinionated? Did that mean that Menocchio would not listen to someone who had tales to tell him?

Secondly, Menocchio walked to Venice “on several occasions”, perhaps as many as three times in 1583 alone. As already mentioned, Venice was 100 kilometres from Montereale. For an adult male who was fit and used to a physically challenging life — as we have already noted, Menocchio identified himself as “miller, carpenter, sawyer, builder of walls and other things” — it seems that this distance could be easily covered in a two days’ walk.¹⁰³ It seems reasonably certain that a man of Menocchio’s age and physical fitness could probably walk to Venice and back to Montereale in three days,

were relatively little concerned to denounce heretics, and the local tribunals were not particularly energetic in proceeding against them.” Only after 1580 did the Counter-Reformation’s inquisitorial campaign to probe the hearts and minds of the population really take off. It is also important to note that it was during the turn-of-the-century tenure of Menocchio’s final judge and tormentor, Fra Girolamo Asteo da Pordenone, that inquisitorial trials reached their zenith. Andrea Del Col, “Shifting Attitudes in the Social Environment towards Heretics: The Inquisition in Friuli in the Sixteenth Century” in Hans Rudolf Guggisberg, Bernd Moeller, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds., *Ketzerverfolgung im 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 65–82. See also John Martin, *Venice’s Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Ruth Martin, *Witchcraft and Inquisition in Venice 1550–1650* (Oxford, 1989).

102 Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 154.

103 To quote a completely decontextualized example, when Samuel Bamford walked from post-Peterloo Manchester to London in the spring of 1820, he did so in a fairly rambling, desultory manner, stopping at many public houses and checking out the sights along the way. The penultimate leg of his journey, from Stoke Goldington, near Northampton, to north London — a distance of roughly 80 kilometres — was negotiated in one day which had 13 hours of daylight. *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (Oxford, 1984, pp. 270ff., especially 284–286.) The 100 kilometres between Montereale and Venice could probably have been covered in one day during the time of year when the hours of sunlight were longest.

travelling at a leisurely pace, providing that he did not dawdle in the taverns along the roadside. How many times had Menocchio been to Venice in the preceding 30 years? Another witness, Giovanni Antonio Melchiori, replied, "It was about twenty-five years ago in the house of *Messer Francesco Lazaro of Venice* [emphasis added] in the square of Montereale, and the priest, who is now at the parish of Valvasone [Odorico Vorai], was outside with the aforesaid Menocchio, and I recognized their voices because they were talking loudly about matters of the faith...."¹⁰⁴ Who was Messer "Francesco Lazaro of Venice"? Is this another hint? We know that Menocchio went to the city, but did the city also come to Menocchio?

Thirdly, Venice was the most polyglot city of Menocchio's time: "exotic visitors and residents were very much a part of the city's social landscape, giving it much of its worldly and cosmopolitan air. ...[A] high incidence of foreigners was one of the main distinguishing features of the port zone: they averaged no fewer than one for every 2.5 *popolani* households."¹⁰⁵ For centuries it had been the crossroads between East and West. It was a maritime city, which meant that vast numbers of men came and went on an almost constant basis. Venice was a place where one could rub shoulders with the most diverse range of individuals — on the decks of its galleys and in the teeming gondolas that swarmed on its canals, along its quays, docks, wharfs, warehouses, and marinas, and in its hostels and taverns, such men no doubt shared their experiences. Venice was, in fact, everything that Montereale was not.

Finally, Menocchio seems to have had an acquaintance with the Koran; his ideas find resonances in the sacred text of Islam. Ginzburg dismisses this connection, although he never really considers it. If we do take the hints and clues listed above seriously, then how do we explain Menocchio's knowledge? Was Simon the Jew correct, and was Menocchio's "most beautiful book" the Koran? Ginzburg himself tells us that an Italian translation of the Koran was published in Venice in 1547.

We now come to that penumbral netherworld — a veritable black hole — of historical uncertainty. Was the small-town miller awed by these surroundings? Did Menocchio bite his tongue in the presence of strangers? Or did he find a sympathetic audience there? In Venice Menocchio bought *Il fioreto de la Bibia*; did he buy other books? Did Menocchio buy his copy of the Koran (if he did, in fact, own one) in Venice? Did he talk with the booksellers? Did he talk with others who were browsing at the booksellers' stalls? Whom else did Menocchio meet in Venice? The papal nuncio remarked that there was a "great crowd of Turks" in Venice.¹⁰⁶ Did the man from Montereale encoun-

¹⁰⁴ Del Col, *Domenico Scandella*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Shipbuilders*, pp. 93–94. It should be noted that Davis's figures relate to the 1642 census; it should also be kept in mind that he is reporting "households" and that many (or most?) of the foreigners would have been solitary transients, given the nature of their work as sailors.

¹⁰⁶ Pullan, *The Jews of Europe*, p. 256.

ter Muslim sailors who had recently been captured at the Battle of Lepanto? Did he make the acquaintance of men who had been captured by the Ottomans during some other skirmish or set-piece battle and who were subsequently ransomed by the Venetians?¹⁰⁷ Did he hear about the experiences of men who had been seized by the Barbary pirates? Did Menocchio meet Christians who had knowledge of Islam? Some Christians who had been “in the Levant [and who] call themselves by Turkish names and live among the Turks for reasons of their own, but without being circumcised or committing those acts by one accepts the faith of Islam. Such people return to Christianity when they come home.”¹⁰⁸ Did he learn about another type of Christian who had ventured into the Islamic world and then converted to Islam upon discovering an attraction to its egalitarianism?¹⁰⁹ Or did Menocchio befriend men who had come into contact with the Turks on a more intimate basis — “bringing home wives and foreign habits”?¹¹⁰

So many questions: if we cannot answer them, should we therefore avoid considering them? These unanswerable questions force us into that zone where an *archéologie du silence* can too easily become transformed into silence, pure and simple.¹¹¹ If historical documentation fails us even before we reach this degree-zero of silence, the conjectural approach urged on us by Ginzburg himself should nonetheless give us pause to reflect on a Holmesian history of possibility, eliminating the impossible and then sorting through whatever remains, however improbable, to look for a contingent field of force within which something like the truth might have resided.

107 The likelihood of capture was so imbricated into Venetian experience that “there were local *scuole* and *hospedali* dedicated to raising ransom money”. Davis, *Shipbuilders*, p. 101.

108 This statement was made in his own defence by “Enriques Nuñez, otherwise Abraham called Righetto, alternately Christian and Jew” who was handed over to the Inquisition by the Venetian Council of Ten in 1570 (quoted in Pullan, *The Jews of Europe*, p. 69).

109 Venetian women often asked local diviners about missing family members: “sometimes an entire group of lost male relatives: was he (or they) alive or dead? was he free or enslaved? had he abandoned Christianity (‘si faceva turco’)? Armed with magical mirrors, smoke, or even a vase filled with holy water that conjured up images of a miniature Moor (‘un hometto vestito da negro giovane, con un colar al collo’), the minor sorcerers of the community attempted (at 2 or more lire per session) to give their clients the reassurances that officials of the State, the Church, and the Arsenal were apparently unable to supply.” Davis, *Shipbuilders*, p. 115, see also pp. 17, 26, 42. Most converts to Islam came from the lower classes: sailors, ship’s cooks or carpenters, cabin boys, traders, fishermen, and so on. Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558–1685* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 41–43.

110 Davis, *Shipbuilders*, p. 116.

111 Ginzburg himself seems to approve this approach by linking it to Michel Foucault’s early concern with exclusions, prohibitions, and limits which characterized *Histoire de la folie*: “What interests Foucault primarily are the act and the criteria of the exclusion, the excluded a little less so.” But Foucault disappointed Ginzburg; he was an apostate who cowered timidly before Jacques Derrida’s “facile, nihilistic objections” which meant that “Foucault’s ambitious project of an *archéologie du silence* becomes transformed into silence pure and simple”. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. xvii.